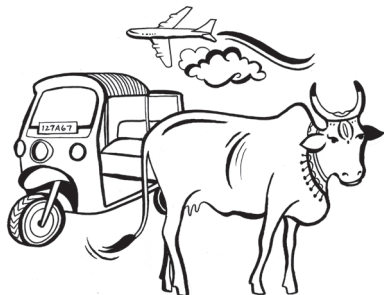


Kolkata Airport



I can't wait to grab my suitcase and walk through to the other side.

It's hard to believe that I've finally arrived in India, and that I, Mira Levenson, made it here, all by myself . . . against all odds. You'd think your mum would *want* to encourage you to visit the place where your grandad grew up. But it feels like it's been me who's had to make it happen . . . well, to be precise . . . me and Priya, my second cousin, who's the same age as me. And if we hadn't got in touch with each other through Facebook after Grandad died, I don't suppose I would be standing here now.

I don't care how many times Mum tells me that the only reason she hasn't been back to India since she was my age is that her and Priya's mum, Aunt Anjali, 'just lost touch' . . . I don't believe her. When I finally persuaded her to start talking to Anjali it seemed to take them hours and hours of phone calls till they could sound anything like normal with each

other. Then, when Mum finally agreed I could make this trip, she kept switching between over-the-top happiness and nervousness. What was it she said to me?

‘You’re going in Grandad’s place, Mira. If I could go with you, I would.’

But I didn’t believe that either, because if she really wanted to go, then what’s been stopping her for all these years . . . or Grandad for that matter? When I asked him when the last time he’d been to Kolkata was, he said it was when his ‘ma’ died, which was thirty years ago. I didn’t even know my own great-grandma’s name was ‘Medini’, till he told me. The more I think about it, the more I know it can’t be true that the reason why no one in our family’s been back to India for so long is that everyone was ‘working too hard’, ‘couldn’t afford it’ or ‘just lost touch’. There are kids in my year at school who go to the other side of the world *every year* to see family, and it’s not like they’re rich or anything or not hard-working.

It’s sad really, because not long before he died Grandad seemed to decide that he wanted to go back ‘home’. I remember that’s what he called it, because it made me wonder how long you have to live in a place before you think of it as home.

‘If I get better, you can come to India with Nana Kath and me!’ he told me, in that way he had of making you think that anything he said would actually

happen. But he never did get better. I suppose it's because he's not here any more that I felt like I had to answer Priya's email, like I *needed* to keep some kind of connection to the place where Grandad was born . . . for both of us. But arranging to visit India has been such a struggle: getting Mum and Anjali to talk to each other in the first place, then persuading Mum that I'd be all right flying with a minder (I am fourteen!), then Anjali convincing Mum that I'd be well looked after, then getting the time off school (mainly because I said I'll be working in Anjali's children's refuge and organizing an art project) then the luck of Priya being picked for a dance gala so she only has a couple of hours of lessons a day. I think it's probably fair to say that me and Priya have been on a mission to wear down any objections, but even after all our planning Mum was still wavering. I think it was Dad who finally persuaded her that it was a good idea for me to come here. I overheard them talking one night . . .

'Let her go, Uma. I remember when I was her age I got so into tracing my roots. I drew up this whole journey of my dad's family from Poland to the East End. It's why I became interested in history in the first place.'

Good old Dad!

'I suppose I did visit at her age . . . so it's only fair to let Mira go too.' Mum sighed as if a part of her was

actually afraid to let me come here. I don't know why, but I intend to find out.

Now here I am, crushed up close to all these people yelling instructions over each other's heads, scrambling for cases and trolleys, I'm being jostled backwards and forwards, but mostly backwards . . . The air-conditioning is either switched off or broken and sweat patches are spreading embarrassingly under my T-shirt. Jidé says boys sweat, girls glow, but I reckon whatever spin you put on it, it's the same. There's no way I can meet Anjali and Priya looking and smelling like this.

Gradually people start to steer their trolleys, laden with cases, back out through the crowd so that I catch sight of the conveyor belt for the first time. No sign of *my* case yet. Suddenly my stomach tenses into a nervous knot of excitement . . . I know it sounds a bit sad, but I've loved everything so far – the take-off, the hot towels, and even the moment when I handed over my passport to the sour-faced uniformed woman sitting behind her glass screen. She checked me against my photo a couple of times and for a second I thought she wasn't going to let me through, but then she handed my passport back to me and said, 'Welcome to Kolkata,' without even glancing up.

I take another look at my passport photo. I suppose I do look different now. I was only twelve when this

was taken. Jidé laughed his head off when I showed it to him, remembering me like that. I've got jet-black hair (no sign of dye) tucked neatly behind my ears and I'm wearing no make-up (not even eyeliner or lipgloss). No dangly earrings either, just neat little gold studs. My braces must have just been fitted, because my mouth looks all pouchy, like I'm struggling to stretch my lips closed over them.

'Have I changed that much?' I asked Jidé as he handed the passport back to me.

'Smile!' he said, snapping a photo on my dinky digital camera, the one mum and dad gave me for my birthday. 'What do you think?' he asked, laughing and showing it to me.

It's a good photo . . . It actually makes me look like I've got cheekbones! The best ones are always when you don't expect them to be taken, but I still can't get used to myself without my brace. It only came off a few days ago. I scan from Jidé's photo to the passport picture. It's still me . . . the eyes are just the same, but I look so little-girly compared to now, and my hair's so neat! I can't believe Jidé liked me when I looked like that! I stow the camera and my passport safely back in my bag and feel around for the photo of him I always carry around with me. I don't know why I love this one so much, but it was taken when we first met. I can't believe how young he looks either! Just thinking of Jidé makes me feel a very long way from home. I

wonder where he is now, probably on his way to France on the coach, winding up through the mountains. Maybe it will make it easier to be away from him, not being able to be in touch for at least two weeks. Maybe . . .

I glance over at an old couple who are waiting patiently for their cases. They arrived in baggage claim just ahead of me, so maybe there's no need to panic . . . yet. They're not, anyway. The woman's sitting on an empty trolley and the old man's standing next to her, one hand resting on her shoulder. The woman idly unravels her tight grey plait and the old man lifts his hand and runs his fingers from the top to the bottom of her silvery waves. She tilts her neck backwards and rests her head in his hand.

'My Iris,' I hear him whisper to her. She looks up at him and smiles, and he struggles to bend towards her to kiss her on the lips. I don't know why it's so embarrassing for two old people to show that they love each other *like that*, but it just is. You hardly ever see that sort of love between people their age. Jidé and I have been together for three years, nearly, and that's way longer than any of our friends. I wonder how long those two have known each other. Probably most of their lives, like my Nana Kath and Grandad Bimal. Poor Nana Kath – it must be so hard for her to live on her own now. She said she would come with me, and

I believed her, but she's not well enough. Now I think of it, the person who was happiest that I was coming here was Nana Kath.

'I spent years trying to persuade your grandad to take time off work to go back and visit his family. You're going to love Kolkata. And you must send my love to Lila,' she told me.

Apparently Nana went to Kolkata for the first time after she and Grandad got married, and she loved it, meeting my great-grandma and getting to know Grandad's sister Lila, who taught her how to cook the best curries and sweets. Nana Kath is the most amazing cook. Just thinking about her curry makes my tummy rumble. Grandad always used to joke that his English wife was a better cook than any of the Bengali wives he knew!

It's actually quite weird how much the old man with the trolley reminds me of Grandad. With his thin V-necked jumper, striped shirt, tie, smart trousers and shiny shoes, he looks just like he's stepped out of Grandad's wardrobe.

I must be staring, because the old man catches me watching him and nods in my direction. How embarrassing is that! I quickly look away. I never mean to stare, but sometimes it feels like I'm in a sort of trance, as if I'm watching a film being acted out in front of me and I forget that I'm actually part of what's going on and that I can be seen too! I get so caught up

in people-watching that I forget that it's really rude to stare. I suppose what I try to do (because it wouldn't feel right to take an *actual* photo) is take a photo in my head so I can pluck it out of my memory and paint or draw it later. Jidé says I'm always staring. He usually gives me a nudge to snap me out of it.

The old man is still watching me as I turn back to the carousel and pretend to be interested in the same parcels, cases and rucksacks I've been watching for what seems like forever, going round and round on the dull grey belt. Some of them are so well sealed, their surfaces plastered with Tipp-Ex addresses, I get the feeling that whoever packed them didn't really believe that they would arrive. Then the dreaded 'what if' thoughts start to bombard me. What if my case doesn't turn up? What if I've waited here for so long that Aunt Anjali and Priya have given up on me and aren't there on the other side of that wall? What if Priya and me don't get on? I mean, I hardly know her – all we've done is Facebooked and Skyped and the odd phone conversation. What if . . . ?

I take my mobile out of my bag to call Anjali, but I can't seem to find a network. What if they've left and I can't get in touch with them? Suddenly my heart's racing. I know I need to keep calm, but this is exactly why I exploded at Mum. Since Grandad died she's been getting Nana Kath to teach her how to cook Indian food, and the day before I left she made this

unbelievable feast all by herself. Not as good as Nana Kath's curry, as my little brother Krish couldn't help pointing out, but still tasty. The thing that got on my nerves though is that she kept trying to use the meal as a sort of rehearsal for me.

'How do you say . . . that was delicious?' Mum drilled me for the hundredth time. But all the words she thought she was teaching me I'd heard Grandad say anyway, and I remember them.

'Khub bhalo,' I said, just to get her off my case.

I don't know what her problem was, but for the last few days before I left she was so stressed and uptight. Dad said she was just worried about me flying alone, but it wasn't just that. She kept telling me what I had to wear, what I had to pack, what presents I had to give to who, and what I should say to Anjali. It was as if she was trying to make up for lost time and give me a crash course in all things Indian or something. She just went on and on at me about stuff that wasn't that important . . . and the things that would have been really useful, like sorting out my phone, she didn't get around to doing. I just got more and more wound up until we had a huge row. In the end I didn't even hug her at the airport or say goodbye properly. We don't really argue that much, me and Mum, not compared to most people I know, and when we do we always make up really quickly – usually by sending each other 'sorry texts', even if we're both in the house, so it feels

even more wrong to have left things the way we did.

I shove my mobile into the little pouch in my bag, but something's stopping it sitting snugly inside. I feel around and pull out a tiny parcel of white tissue paper, sealed with a red ribbon and a tag . . .

Sorry earrings! Peace offering!
Love you, Mum x

A lump forms in my throat and a wave of tiredness washes over me. I feel mean and guilty and wish I could 'sorry text' her back, but my stupid phone won't work. I wish I could text Jidé too. Just a silly, nothing text like we ping-pong back and forward all the time. It just feels so weird not to be in contact with anyone. I take a deep breath to stop the tears welling up, walk over to a bench and sit down. The argument wasn't really about anything much and now it feels stupid to have gotten so angry. After Mum's over-the-top supper I wandered into her bedroom to ask her if I could borrow her earrings – *these* earrings – she never wears them anyway. She was sitting on her bed looking at some old letters. I didn't think anything of it so I just sat by her side and peered over her shoulder . . .

5th November 1981

Dear Uma,

I can't believe that you are actually coming to see us, after all this time.

I quickly scanned to the bottom of the page and read . . .

There will be no more time to write now before you come, so instead of waiting for your letters, as I have done for all these years, now I am waiting for you.

Your cousin,

Anjali x

I thought she was about to give this, and all the other letters and photos, to me, but I couldn't have been more wrong. As soon as she realized I was reading over her shoulder she jumped up off the bed, gathered everything up and bundled it into a faded cloth-covered album that I'd never seen before. Then she placed it inside her old wooden chest, at the end of her bed, where she keeps all her precious, *not-to-be-messed-with* things. She gave me no explanation. Nothing! So all I did was ask her a few questions, about when she went to India at my age and what she and Anjali got

up to. She's told me bits and pieces before, so I wasn't expecting her to go off into a rant – telling me it was none of my business and to stop digging up the past, whatever that's supposed to mean. What's weird is, normally she loves sharing stories about when she was growing up.

It felt like she was shutting me out, when I just wanted to understand more about Kolkata. I don't think it was that outrageous of me to ask a few questions, considering I was about to fly half way round the world on my own to meet my family for the first time.

That's why, just before we left for the airport, I snuck back into Mum's room and took her letter album. Jidé was right to tell me to put it back. I should never have taken it, because ever since then it feels like Mum's letters are burning a great big guilty hole in my conscience.

Maybe, just maybe, I can do something to put things right. So here's my deal: if there's such a thing as what I call Notsurewho Notsurewhat, what some people call God, good karma, bad karma . . . whatever forces are out there operating in the universe . . .

I'm going to go to the loos to freshen up and *if*, when I come out, my case is on that carousel I'll put Mum's letters away and never read them. When I get home I'll place them back in her old wooden chest and hopefully she'll never know I took them. No

harm done. Bad karma reversed. Maybe . . .

I stand up as a tall moustached man wearing a military-looking uniform walks past me. I take a deep breath from my belly like I've learned to do in singing lessons, so my voice doesn't come out all weak and wonky.

'Excuse me, my case hasn't arrived . . .'

His eyes travel down my bare legs and I find myself tugging at the bottom of my denim miniskirt. He glances upward again but doesn't look me in the eye. Instead he swipes something off his shoulder, as if I'm an insignificant insect that's been bothering him.

'Wait, little longer. Takes time,' he finally mutters, before wandering off.

Now I wish I hadn't bothered asking 'Creepy Guard' anything. I scan the carousel again. There are only a few bags left, but none of them are mine.

Another wave of tiredness hits me and my stomach is well and truly tied in knots. I have got to get myself together before I meet Priya and Anjali. I walk over to the loos and lock myself into one of the cubicles. It's like an oven in here! I start to undress and I take out the lemon wipes Mum packed for me. I wash the staleness of a night's travelling off my skin. I spray on some deodorant and begin to feel less grim. I fold my miniskirt and T-shirt into my bag and take out the soft cotton salwar-kameez, the one Grandad's sister, Lila, sent for me, the one I said I wouldn't be seen dead

in . . . because Mum was going on and on about how important it was that I wear ‘appropriate clothing’. The fine cotton is paper thin and a rich autumn orange, with a paisley black and red block print all over it. Orange is my favourite colour and the cloth feels soft and cool against my skin. I can’t believe I was so mean to Mum about it now.

I come out of the cubicle and look in the mirror. I take out my eyeliner and draw a black sweep over the top lid, arching slightly upward, and a thin line on the bottom lid, like I always do. I comb my hair and then bend forward and throw it back again so it doesn’t look too tidy.

As I open the door the old lady I saw earlier brushes past me and a wave of her grey hair sweeps across my shoulder, wafting along with it the sweet smell of lily of the valley perfume.

Because I’m looking backwards and walking forwards, I fall straight over a trolley that’s neatly stacked up with cases. I just about manage to save myself from falling flat on my face, but I drop my bag and *everything* spills out across the floor. I grab my new camera (it seems to be OK) and my passport. The old man, who was pushing the trolley, is bending down now, helping to pick my things up and chuntering his apology in Bengali. I look at him blankly and he suddenly gets it that I don’t understand. Now he’s this close to me I realize he’s wearing the same

Old Spice aftershave that we used to buy Grandad Bimal for Christmas and birthdays. It makes me shiver how that smell brings me to feeling close to Grandad.

‘Sorry!’ He smiles at me as I try to collect myself together, along with all the ‘just in case’ stuff I slung into my shoulder bag before I left. I’m so busy picking up tweezers, eyeliner, period stuff, mobile, iPod, *Wuthering Heights*, a photo of Jidé . . . that I completely forget about Mum’s letter album until the old man hands me one of her postcards. I check around the floor to make sure nothing else has gone astray and then I hold out my hand for the old man to pass the card back to me, but he’s busy inspecting the stamp.

He reaches in his pocket for his thick-rimmed spectacles and holds the postcard up closer to his eyes. The image is of a sculpture of a mother feeding her baby, the umbilical cord wrapped around their bodies like a vine.

‘This takes me back . . . I thought so, yes, this is it,’ he says, tapping the card excitedly with his finger. ‘1966 . . . Now that was a great gathering.’ The old man seems to have forgotten I’m even standing here.

I glance over to the empty luggage carousel and my heart sinks as I watch it slowly grinding to a halt. I suppose that’s decided it. No case, and a stranger is holding one of my mum’s precious cards in his hands. My stomach coils into an even tighter knot.

The old man is looking up at me as if he's waiting for an answer to a question.

'Dr Nayan Sen,' he's saying, handing me back the postcard and shaking my hand. 'You know, I went to this very conference.'

'My grandad was a doctor,' I blurt out. Why am I always so awkward with strangers?

He looks at me with new interest.

'His name?'

'Dr Bimal Chatterjee,' I answer automatically.

'I don't believe it!' he says, his eyes bulging in surprise. Suddenly he laughs so hard that he starts to cough and splutter. He's wheezing as his wife comes out of the loos smelling even more strongly of perfume. She leads him over to a seat.

'Iris, Iris . . . this is *Bimal's* granddaughter. Can you believe? Such a shame we lost touch. Remember Bimal and Kath?' he asks, shaking her plump arm and making her whole body wobble.

'Of course I do,' Iris smiles. She has a matter-of-fact Yorkshire accent. 'Kath and I were practically best friends, but that was a very long time ago. Are you . . . Uma's daughter?'

I nod, feeling a bit weird that these strangers seem to know my family so well.

'Never! Seems like yesterday your mother was born. You do look a little like your grandad, something here about the eyes . . . ' Iris says.

A bit of me wonders if this is actually happening. I feel like I've entered some sort of weird no-man's-land. The faster I get out of here the better . . . I don't want to have to tell them about Grandad, and Anjali and Priya will be starting to worry, and I've still got to report my case missing . . . but I can't think of a way to cut this short.

'And how is my old friend Bimal? Taking a well-earned break, I hope.'

It's too late now.

'Grandad died last year,' I almost whisper. Even though this old couple are strangers to me, it still feels awful having to tell them . . . almost cruel to bump into someone by chance and then have to give them bad news.

Tears fill Nayan's eyes. Iris takes the handkerchief out of his pocket and hands it to him.

Although I haven't cried about Grandad for ages, Nayan's tears make my throat tighten and there's nothing I can do about it, my eyes well up too, again.

'Sorry! Sorry!' Nayan sighs and pats my knee. 'Just so many memories. Happy memories really, and it feels like yesterday that your grandad and I were sailing to England together. Isn't that so, Iris? Time just goes like that.' He clicks his fingers and his wife smiles fondly at him as he trumpet-blows his nose to pull himself together.

‘Here . . . take my card. Kolkata and London address,’ he says, rummaging in his pocket. ‘Tell Kath you met us. We would very much like to reunite with her one day, catch up with news for old time’s sake and . . . Here, you can write your home number and address in my book! Maybe we’ll send Uma and Kath a card from Kolkata.’ He hands me a small green leather address book with a matching mini biro tucked in the side. It’s the sort of ‘quality item’ Grandad used to have. ‘Put it under B for Bimal and then I’ll know where to look!’ says Nayan, smiling at me.

I write my home address and phone number and swap the book for his card, which I place in my purse.

‘Would you like us to wait with you?’ asks Iris, glancing over at the luggage carousel.

‘No, thanks, I’m fine!’

I’ve rehearsed the moment when I meet Priya and Anjali so many times, and walking through to Arrivals with old friends of Grandad Bimal and Nana Kath’s is not part of my plan, no matter how nice they are.

‘What a strange twist of fate to bump into you like this! A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Bimal’s granddaughter . . .’ Nayan raises his eyebrows in a question and holds out his hand for me to shake again.

‘My name’s Mira,’ I say.

He nods and smiles as he keeps my hand in his, as if he can’t believe that we’re parting so soon.

I do feel a bit weirded out as I watch the old couple wheel their trolley away. That's why the *tap, tap* on my shoulder makes me jump right out of my skin.

'Sorry! I am wandering around looking for miniskirt, not Indian girl in traditional dress!' Creepy Guard laughs at his own joke. 'Your family are waiting for you, worrying where you are. Baggage may be lost. Make some report. Better not wait more, or you may be lost too.' He fires these orders at me, then goes off through customs. I suppose I have to follow him.

Now he's sitting behind a desk.

'Probably your case is travelling in other direction,' he chuckles, not exactly kindly.

I nod without looking at him and start to walk past.

'One minute! Quick check of hand luggage,' he demands.

I open my bag, feeling slightly sick that I have to let him paw over my belongings.

'What is this?' He asks, pulling out Mum's letter album.

'Personal letters,' I explain.

He looks up at me with a mischievous glint in his eye and begins to pull them out one by one: photos, cards and letters. He lays them on his white Formica table, just for his own amusement, I think. A photo of Mum and Aunt Anjali I've never seen before, hugging each other and grinning happily, catches my eye.

'This is you?' he asks.

‘My mum and aunt,’ I tell him.

‘Looks like you!’ He smirks, glancing down at my covered legs, as I gather up the letters and place them back in the album.

A few minutes ago I could have put these letters away forever, but now, after all that stuff with Grandad’s friend, and Creepy Guard putting them on display, it feels like I don’t have much choice any more. There is no way I will be able to stop myself from reading them now. Bad karma or not.

As I walk through to Arrivals I hold on to my silver bracelet, twisting its small artichoke-heart charm round and round. I don’t think I’ve ever felt such a mix-up of emotions as I’m feeling right now, as I take my first steps into India on my own.

Meeting Priya



‘Mira! Mira!’

I suppose that must be Priya leaping up and down, hollering and waving. She looks nothing like she did last week on Skype . . . I’m sure she had long hair. As I draw nearer she vaults over the barrier and sprints towards me with her arms opening into the widest and warmest of hugs. The tears that have been threatening to spill over for the last half-hour suddenly cascade down my face. To meet a whole side of your family in the flesh, for the first time in your life, is the strangest feeling in the world, sort of like coming home.

Anjali steps forward and enfolds me in her graceful arms and the soft folds of her cotton sari. Her hair’s pulled back into a tight bun, and without wearing a spot of make-up she still looks beautiful. She takes my head in her hands and studies my face. The tears are rolling down her cheeks too.

‘So pretty, like your ma at your age.’ She smiles at me and kisses my cheek. ‘We were getting so worried